

FATHER FABER



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By

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FREDERICK WILLIAM FABER was descended from a Huguenot family that took refuge in England in consequence of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. His grandfather was incumbent of Calverley, Yorkshire. Father Faber was born in the vicarage there on June 28, 1814.

Family and Education

Frederick was the seventh child in a family of eight, but the early deaths of his three immediate seniors caused a considerable difference in age between his elder brothers and himself, and gave him something of the position of an only son. "Frederick must surely prosper," said a relative of the family, "for he is the child of his mother's prayers." Looking back upon his boyhood, he himself said that he was a most spoiled child. His mother, it is true, clung to the youngest of her sons with an especial affection, but both of his parents took prudent care to cherish the promise that early revealed itself.

Many of the characteristics that stamped his personality in later years were apparent in childhood—the joyousness of his nature, his candor and openness, the gaiety of his conversation, his reliance upon himself.

A schoolboy adventure told by his brother is worth relating to illustrate his eloquence as a boy. "He was once caught by a farmer and his wife when trespassing on their premises with some of his youthful comrades. The farmer seemed disposed to proceed to extremities, when Frederick undertook the defense of the party. The good wife soon interposed in their behalf, saying to her husband in the dialect of the country, 'Ye mun let them gan, maister, the young gentleman has sic a pratty tongue.' " "This faculty," he adds, "certainly never diminished in after times."

Soon after Frederick's birth, his father was appointed secretary to the Bishop of Durham, and the family moved in consequence to Bishop Auckland. His imagination was stimulated there and his poetic temperament fed by the beautiful natural surroundings of his home and the scenes of feudal splendor at that time still to be witnessed in the ancient city of Durham, a legacy to the episcopal see from Catholic days. Still more powerful, however, was the striking effect that the scenery and romantic associations of the Lake Country made upon him when he was sent to school at Kirkby Stephen in Westmorland.

Amid the beauties of mountain, lake, and forest in which he passed his first, free, happy, school days, his love of nature, already ardent, became a passion. A few years afterwards he wrote:

*Nature hath been my mother: all her moods
On the grey mountain or the sullen floods
Have charmed my soul.*

Frederick's mother died when he was fifteen and he lost his father a few years later. To a person with his affectionate temperament, being orphaned at an early age was a sad trial, but he was fortunate in possessing an admirable guardian in his eldest brother.

As he grew into manhood, he inevitably became an enthusiast for the poetry of Wordsworth, who said of Faber that he had more than any other man known to him a sympathy with nature like his own.

In 1825, Frederick Faber passed from Kirkby Stephen to Shrewsbury School and shortly afterwards he left for Harrow. The future Cardinal Manning was among his contemporaries there.

In 1833, Faber went into residence at Banjo College, Oxford. "His prepossessing appearance and remarkable talent," says Father Bowden, his biographer, "together with conversational gifts of a very high order, made him a general favorite and he soon laid the foundation of several lasting friendships." Something of a dilettante perhaps in his university days, Faber did not strike his contemporaries as likely to develop into the power that he became later. He studied, wrote poetry and articles, spoke eloquently at the University Debating Society (afterwards known as the Union), and gathered round him a circle of men to whom, as to himself, religion was the first consideration.

Faber had gone up to Oxford just before Keble's Assize Sermon had launched forward the High Church Movement and the "Tracts for the Times" had started on their momentous career. In spite of the evangelical opinions he had inherited and then strengthened at Harrow, he attended Newman's famous sermons at Saint Mary's Church, but it was some time before he became a wholehearted "Newmanite."

At the end of 1834, Faber was elected a scholar of University College. In 1836, he took his degree but his second class was a great disappointment to him and was followed by another when he was unsuccessful in gaining a fellowship. No doubt his comparative failure must be attributed partly to his numerous activities, but ill-health, which was to dog his footsteps all through life, must also share the responsibility. However, his success in winning the Newdigate Prize, with a poem on the Knights of Saint John, was compensation. In January of the following year, he obtained his fellowship, which enabled him to carry out his intention to enter the ministry of the Church of England.

"I have now but one wish," he writes to a friend, "to employ my whole life in doing the little good to Christ and His Church that my dear Master has rendered me capable of doing in my generation." He little dreamt in what way this aspiration was to be fulfilled.

Lake District and Foreign Travel

The Long Vacation of 1837 found Faber with a few pupils at Ambleside in his beloved Lake Country. There, he met Wordsworth, with whom he used to take long rambles among the mountains. In August of that year, he received the Anglican diaconate in the Cathedral Church of Saint Wilfrid's, Ripon. Full orders were conferred on May 26th, 1839, on the Feast of Saint Philip Neri, a day that was to mean much to him in later years.

During a short tour in the summer of 1839 in Belgium and the Rhineland, he frequented several Catholic churches, but was somewhat scandalized by their lack of artistic taste and by the apparent careless irreverence of both the priests and the people. Making due allowance for any truth there might have been in his criticisms, it is evident that his insular and protestant prejudices were still strong. Still, he became familiar with Catholic devotions and he learnt to say the Breviary while abroad.

In the summer of 1840, Faber took up a tutorship at Ambleside. There, he also resumed the parochial work that he had begun upon his ordination and continued during the intervening summers. His pastoral zeal in what had been a greatly neglected parish and his successful preaching more than doubled attendance at the church. In the autumn of the same year, the fruits of his talent for poetry appeared in a volume of verse, "*The Cherwell Water-Lily and other Poems*," which attracted considerable attention.

Late in February of 1841, tutor and pupil started on an extensive tour of the Continent. Faber hoped that travel might improve his health, which he had impaired by overwork. He also hoped to make a practical study of how Anglicanism stood with regard to the rest of Christendom. The tour proceeded as far as Constantinople, where Faber fell ill.

The journal that he kept of his travels and a work based upon it that he published in the following year, called "*Sights and Thoughts in Foreign Churches and among Foreign Peoples*," reveal how far forward the current of the Oxford Movement had carried him since his previous tour abroad, two years before. Now, he was unable to conceal his admiration for the outward manifestations of Catholicism wherever he met them and his growing dissatisfaction with Anglicanism. No wonder the diarist, Henry Crabb Robinson, Wordsworth's guest at Rydal Mount during the winter of 1842-43, who had theological discussions with Faber, wrote of him as, "a flaming zealot for the new doctrines" and "a sad fanatic."

Anglican Ministry

An important decision in Faber's life was made when he decided at the end of 1842 to accept the College living of Elton, in Huntingdonshire. He had been hesitating for some time, held back by his love for poetry, the writing of which he felt he ought to sacrifice for pastoral work.

When he acquainted Wordsworth with his intention, he received this reply: "I do not say you are wrong; but England loses a poet." "Oh, pray for me," he wrote to a friend, "that, buried in that village, I may endeavor to live an apostolical life in church, parsonage, and cottages. God being my helper, I solemnly purpose to do so." His zeal was to have its reward and soon, for in less than three years he was to seek admittance into the one Household of Faith.

Faber considered that the best preparation for his new duties would be the study of Catholic pastoral methods abroad, especially in Rome. Doctor Wiseman, then Coadjutor Bishop of the Central District of England, with whom Faber had been in correspondence through his Foreign Churches, gave him letters of introduction to two distinguished Roman residents, Cardinal Acton and Doctor Grant.

Leaving England with a former pupil in April of 1843, Faber traveled across France to Marseilles and then through Genoa, Siena, and Pisa to Rome. At Savona, he was deeply affected by the epitaph on Chiabrera's tomb, written by himself. It read,

*Friend, In life I sought comfort on Mount Parnassus;
Do thou, better advised, seek it on CALVARY!*

Faber, taking this admonition as a sermon to himself, resolved to consecrate his poetic powers directly to the service of religion, an intention that, as a hymn-wright, he would nobly fulfill.

Rome was his goal and Rome, as he afterwards admitted, was completely to change his outlook. At Pisa he notes, "Unaffectedly aloof from the city, in a calm meadow, the great tower leaning like a telescope pointed towards Rome." Winding up a long letter to his brother, he writes, "From the lip of the crater of Baccano, I saw the dome of Saint Peter's. I have crossed the Ponte Molle, where Constantine vanquished Maxentius, and established Christianity, and by moonlight I have prayed at the Tomb of the Apostles, almost alone in the metropolitan church of the whole world. To describe my feelings is impossible."

At the Chiesa Nuova of Saint Philip Neri, to whom he now first began to feel an attraction, Faber saw the room where the Saint used to say Mass. Alluding to this visit a few years later, he said, "How little did I, a Protestant stranger in that room years ago,

dream I should ever be of the Saint's family or that the Oratorian father who shewed it me should in a few years be appointed by the Pope the novice-master of the English Oratorians."

Faber engaged in much amicable discussion with the Catholic clergy he met in Rome regarding the Anglican situation. Without his knowledge, Cardinal Acton arranged for a private audience with the Pope (Gregory XVI) for him. With Doctor Baggs, Rector of the English College, acting as interpreter, Faber and the Pope had a long conversation.

"You must not mislead yourself," said the Pope, "in wishing for unity, yet waiting for your Church to move. Think of the salvation of your own soul." When Faber explained that he feared self-will and individual judging, the Pope replied, "You are all individuals in the English Church, you have only external communion and the accident of being all under the Queen. You know this. You know all doctrines are taught amongst you anyhow. You have good wishes, may God strengthen them! You must think for yourself and for your soul." The Holy Father blessed him, and Faber, deeply moved by the aged Pontiff's earnest and affectionate demeanour, took his leave almost in tears.

Faber's few weeks in Rome urged him perceptibly forward towards the Catholic Church. The unique associations that the Eternal City held with Christianity of every age and the piety he had witnessed there worked upon his feelings and the arguments of the Roman theologians worked upon his intellect. On two occasions during his stay in Rome, he was on the point of being received into the Church and actually took his hat to go to the English College to make his submission, but each time he was diverted from his purpose by some trifling circumstance.

His biographer tells us that his anxiety about his position was the cause of physical injuries from which he suffered during the remainder of his life. Having prayed at the shrine of Saint Aloysius on Saint Aloysius' feast-day, Faber left the church overcome with emotion. Afterwards, he said that he saw then that he must, within three years, either be a Catholic or lose his mind.

A letter written by Faber while on his way back to England at the end of September to his friend, the Reverend J. B. Morris (afterwards of the Society of Jesus), shows how he is continually revolving the difficulties of his situation in his mind. Is he in the One Church? If not, what good are his efforts?

"You have had it put before you," he says to himself, speaking of the Catholic Church, "look at her catholicity, unity, sanctity, fruitful missions, clear miracles, wonderful saints, and ancient things! In one age, while we groaned under dryness and irreverence, were vouchsafed to her Saints Philip Neri, Charles Borromeo, Francis Borgia, Francis Xavier, Francis de Sales, Ignatius, Felix of Cantalice, Aloysius, and Camillus of Lellis! You pray in vain, because you have not really humbled yourself before the Church so revealed to

you. You confess in vain, you communicate in vain—all are shadows. So, thoughts rush upon me. If in happy times I say, '*amore amoris Tui mundo moriar, qui amore amoris mei dignatus es in Cruce mori*,'* then comes the chilling question, Why are you not in the communion where he was who said that, and lived upon it?"

At that time, these thoughts were not quite convictions, but he realized how much more Catholic-minded he had become in previous few months. "I have been much altered," he says in another letter, "since I came abroad this time. I am very, very, very Roman. I have learnt an immense deal, both inwardly and outwardly; and I hope it will lead to something more than feelings."

To those who have not been through a similar experience, it may seem strange that Faber was so very near to entering the Church at this time yet he still delayed. Understandably, he was fearful of making a mistake. In those early days, before the stream of conversions had begun to flow, the change of religion for an Anglican clergyman was more of a leap into the dark than it has since become.

Moreover, and this was the strongest factor in the case, delay was strongly counseled by Newman, his director, who was adopting the same policy. Writing to Newman from Berne on this subject, Faber says, "I hope the end of it all with all of us will be the being led into all truth, and that we may be patient during the dismal meanwhile that is before some of us."

Once back in England, Faber started work in his parish at Elton. He was anxious to pursue his activities there, as he said, "in a spirit of Saint Philip and Saint Alphonso." There was ample scope for his enthusiasm. The parish had been neglected by a nonresident rector, and intemperance and vice were rampant. Faber quickly endeared himself to his flock and, although he met with opposition, before long succeeded in effecting a remarkable reform.

His methods were unconventional. He taught confession and encouraged Sunday games, both unheard-of enormities in the protestant England of those days. He himself lived a most ascetic life. "Luxury was banished from his house," says Roundell Palmer, afterwards, Earl of Selborne, who visited him several times at Elton. "His expenditure upon his church and people (assisted by very generous help from others) was large; upon himself, it was nothing. That he was in all financial respects prudent, I cannot affirm, but he carried into his work a spirit of love and ardent zeal not unlike that of the founders of religious orders in ancient times." His spiritual life was certainly largely based upon that of the great Catholic masters, but, through lack of guidance, his austerities probably exceeded the bounds of prudence.

* *May I die to the world for the love of Thy love, who for the love of my love hast deigned to die on the Cross (Saint Francis of Assisi).*

One undertaking that was destined to be an important development was the formation among the young men of the parish of a kind of community that met at the rectory every night at twelve o'clock for spiritual exercises.

A letter written after Faber's conversion by the Reverend A. P. Stanley, afterwards Dean of Westminster, provides interesting glimpses into the social side of Faber's work at Elton. "It seems that Faber had devoted himself solely to the parish and, with the great energy of his character and fascination of his manners, had produced an effect on the people that I should think was really very extraordinary. He had lived on terms of great familiarity with them, having the young men, and so forth, constantly to dine with him and read with him in his own drawing room. He had pulled down all the divisions in the rectory grounds, so as to turn it into a kind of park and throw it open to the whole parish to walk in, so on Sunday evenings there used to be promenades of one hundred or three hundred people, the poorer classes. And he, walking about from group to group, talking to them. Thus, whilst the old people liked him for his kindness, there had grown up a "young Elton" that quite adored him, and most of whom (about sixteen) have gone over with him, and when Claughton [Faber's successor] came there he found these young farmer boys talking of "the Church of Saint Peter, without which there is no salvation."

Conversion

Faber's wholehearted plunge into parochial activities failed to bring relief to a mind tortured by doubts. "There was many and many an hour," he afterwards wrote, "of bitter and of earnest prayer . . . as to whether I should become a Catholic; many a kissing of the feet of the Crucifix and imploring Jesus to let me stay in the English Church, if it could be His Will; and many a heartfelt prayer that I might not draw back when His Will should be made known."

"I seem to grow more Roman daily," he wrote to Newman in 1844, "and almost to write from out the bosom of the Roman Church instead of from where I am. I suppose I am not going on as I ought to do, for our system seems more and more to enervate me, and I sometimes get a glimpse of a state of mind that would view my position as a parish priest as that of a man telling a lie to people."

The influence of Newman was still keeping him back. Newman, like many other Anglicans since that time, was waiting for something to happen that would make the way clear. He had yet to learn that the self-satisfied serenity of the Established Church was not to be disturbed easily.

Moreover, the increasing success of Faber's pastoral labors created a further complication for him. "The actual face of the village," he wrote, "is changed obviously to worldly eyes, in sobriety and nocturnal quiet. I really cannot without anguish confront the idea of throwing this up and leaving these souls to—I know not what."

Meanwhile fresh trouble was in store for him. An outspoken life of Saint Wilfrid, which he had written for a Tractarian series of English Saints' Lives, raised a storm about his head. Passages like the following, which was only one of many, seemed rank Popery to ordinary protestants. This, and others similar to it, was more than even the majority of advanced Tractarians could swallow.

"He [Wilfrid] saw that the one thing to do was to go to Rome, and learn under the shadow of Saint Peter's chair the more perfect way. To look Romeward is a Catholic instinct, seemingly implanted in us for the safety of the faith."

In the midst of much mortification caused by friends and opponents alike, there came a piece of consolation from an unexpected quarter. Doctor Wareing, Vicar-Apostolic of the Eastern District, sent him a letter of condolence. In return, Faber wrote, "God grant that self-will may not accelerate, nor self-interest retard, any change He may beckon me to. I am far too great a sinner to be plainly told His Will, yet I trust your lordship will acknowledge that, even in my position, I am within reach of grace enough to find the right way, if I do not from self-seeking hold back when light is given."

The conversion of Newman and of several other friends of Faber in the autumn of 1845 made a great impression upon him. He increased his penances and his prayers for guidance. The thought of his flock's dependence on him still weighed with him, until at length he grasped the truth that the salvation of his own soul must be his first consideration. There was another difficulty. His conversion would leave him with no prospect of being able to repay a considerable sum of money he had borrowed on entering his living. There seemed to be a moral obligation to remain where he was until he had paid his debts. Yet, he soon came to realize the rightfulness of ignoring this obstacle to his joining the One, True Church. The decision only just made, there came the generous offer of a friend, who himself had no leanings towards the Catholic Church, to liquidate the debt, with the stipulation that no mention of the matter should ever be made between them.

The last painful struggle now ensued, the upshot of which was a resolve to go to Northampton to make his submission to Bishop Wareing. The dramatic finale to his Anglican ministrations is best told in Father Bowden's words. "On Sunday, November 16th, 1845, at the evening service, after a few preliminary words, he told his people that the doctrines he had taught them, though true, were not those of the Church of England. He said that, as far as the Church of England had a voice, she had disavowed them, and

that consequently he could not remain in her communion, but must go where truth was to be found. Then, he hastily descended the pulpit stairs, threw off his surplice, which he left upon the ground, and made his way as quickly as possible through the vestry to the rectory.”

For a few moments, the congregation remained in blank astonishment. Then, while the majority turned slowly homewards, some of the parishioners, among whom were the church wardens, followed him to the rectory and implored him to reconsider his decision. He might preach whatever doctrine he pleased, they said, and they would never question it, if he would only remain with them. Finding him immovable, they took a sorrowful farewell and left him.

“So much was he worn by anxiety and illness and so keenly did he feel the separation from his place and people, that he feared to fail in the accomplishment of the sacrifice, and extorted a promise from those about him, that they would take him, if necessary by force, on the following morning to be received.”

On a little piece of paper that he afterwards kept, he scribbled this prayer, “O my dear Jesus, accept this intense misery for my sins, and bless my dear mourning people. Elton Rectory, November 16, 1845. Amen, Amen.”

Early the next day, Faber left Elton. He was accompanied by T. F. Knox, (then a Cambridge undergraduate and afterwards an Oratorian), his two servants, and a lay-helper. Four others left on the same day to join him and later seven more followed.

“The party had hoped to escape notice by starting early, but the parishioners were on the lookout. As they drove through the village, every window was thrown open and the poor people waved their handkerchiefs, and sobbed out, “God bless you, Mr. Faber, wherever you go.”

That day was a sorrowful one for Elton, but joyous for Faber and his companions, for in the evening they had the happiness of being received into the Catholic Church by Bishop Wareing. Next morning followed their First Communion and the sacrament of Confirmation, in which Faber took the name of Wilfrid.

It is interesting to notice how Saint Wilfrid had been connected with Faber’s life. Faber was baptized at Saint Wilfrid’s Church, Calverley. He was made a deacon of the Church of England at Saint Wilfrid’s Cathedral, Ripon. From his garden at Elton he could see the spire of the church at Oundle, where Saint Wilfrid died. At Elton, too, he wrote Saint Wilfrid’s life. Now, aided by Saint Wilfrid’s example and prayers, he had at last found his true home in the bosom of the Catholic and Roman Church.

Two days after his reception, Faber wrote, “A new light seems to be shed on everything, and more especially on my past position—a light so clear as to surprise me; and though I

am homeless and unsettled, and as to worldly prospects considerably bewildered, yet there is such a repose of conscience as more than compensates for the intense and fiery struggle that began on the Tuesday and only ended on the Monday morning following.”

Brothers of the Will of God

Faber immediately began to consider how best he could serve the Church, the Church for which he had sacrificed everything. Out of humility, he declined an offer from Bishop Wareing to ordain him at once. He decided to settle initially at Birmingham, where a number of recent converts had taken up their abode, and where he found it possible to gather round him the members, about eight in number, of his little brotherhood that had followed him from Elton. His plan, which had the full approval of the ecclesiastical authorities, was to give the brothers a training that would enable them to be of use to the clergy in their parochial duties; choir-brothers, destined for the priesthood, were also to be received.

Financial difficulties having threatened to put an early end to the enterprise, Faber decided to seek aid, in person, from a friend in Italy. The solution came, however, through the offer of Mr. Hutchinson, his traveling companion, to join the community and devote to it resources of his own. When in Rome, the converts were received by the Pope, who was reminded that his blessings bestowed on Faber three years before had not been without effect. When His Holiness “learnt the annual value of the living Faber had given up, he seemed a good deal impressed. Slapping him on the shoulder, His Holiness said, “Ah! that was a fine patrimony!”

Back in Birmingham, Faber soon gave his community a more ordered shape. They were now known as Brothers of the Will of God, or Wilfridians, from one of their Patrons. Faber took the name of Brother Wilfrid. The brothers spent their time in prayer and study, as it was thought the time was not yet ripe for much external occupation. “Perhaps it was because we were still in the first fervor of our conversion,” wrote Brother Antony (Hutchinson), “but certainly in those early days we seemed to live almost in the companionship of the saints and the Madonna.”

The Wilfridians naturally came in for a good deal of criticism, particularly from hereditary Catholics, who were narrowly watching the proceedings of the converts. That Brother Wilfrid, a layman and a Catholic of only a few months standing, should have charge of a community, some of whom were preparing for the priesthood, was a sufficiently anomalous situation. He himself was as much aware of it as anybody, yet he had been placed there by the bishop, who had expressed his confidence in him and had told him to hold on in spite of misunderstandings.

The community's stay at Birmingham was to be of short duration. In the summer of 1846, Brother Wilfrid received from Lord Shrewsbury the munificent offer of Cotton Hall, Staffordshire, as a monastery. After careful consideration, he decided to accept the proposal and, accordingly, the community moved to its beautiful new home early in September.

One of their first undertakings at Cotton was the building of a church from designs by Pugin. It was dedicated to Saint Wilfrid and on his feast day (October 12th) the foundation-stone was blessed by Bishop Walsh. At the same time, Brother Wilfrid and two other brothers received the tonsure and the four minor orders. At the end of a ten-day retreat that followed, Brother Wilfrid's health broke down so seriously that he was given the last sacraments. Shortly afterwards, through the mercy of God, he made a satisfactory recovery and was directing his community as usual.

For a few months, the brothers found their missionary work hampered, as they had no priest in the community. The difficulty was soon to be happily overcome through the ordination of Brother Wilfrid, who was raised to the priesthood by Bishop Wiseman at Oscott on Holy Saturday, April 3rd, 1847. On his return to Cotton on the same day, the people of the place met him and dragged his carriage themselves in triumphant procession to the house.

Father Faber was now in sole charge of the mission of Cotton. Under his direction, visitation was begun of every house in his extensive parish. Many protestants were induced to come to the chapel and by summer his congregation had grown to such proportions that he had to preach outside in a yard near the house or under the beech trees in the garden.

Conversions were numerous. Less than four months after his ordination, Father Faber had received about 150 people into the Church. The success of his labors naturally aroused considerable opposition but, in a short time, only one protestant family was left in the parish.

Wilfridians Join the Oratory

Hitherto, the Brothers of the Will of God, as a newly-founded institute, had not been under vows. Towards the end of 1847, it was thought that they were sufficiently well established for the priest-members (Father Faber and Father Antony Hutchinson) to make their vows to Bishop Wiseman, who was then Administrator of the London District. It happened that at this time Father Newman was returning to England as Superior of the Oratory of Saint Philip Neri. One day when Father Faber was at meditation, and, as he

said, when nothing was further from his thoughts, he felt an interior call to join the Oratory. The matter was discussed with the choir-brothers, who, on hearing of his experience, expressed their acquiescence.

No sooner was the decision made than the two Wilfridian priests were summoned to London to Bishop Wiseman, who was expecting to receive their vows. The Bishop, on being informed of their new plans, “solemnly approved of the whole as coming from God, and being His adorable Will.”

The step was a great sacrifice for Father Faber. Not only was he, the founder and Superior of an Institute, to become a mere novice, but he understood he was also never to return to Saint Wilfrid’s, a place that had already become endeared to him on account of its natural beauty and the wonderful success of his labors. On February 14th, 1848, the second anniversary of the day on which he had drawn up the Wilfridian rule, he and his community were solemnly admitted into the Congregation of the Oratory.

“Father Superior has now left us,” he wrote, “all in our Philippine habits with turndown collars, like so many good boys brought in after dinner. Since my admission, I seem to have lost all attachment to everything but obedience. I could dance and sing all day, because I am so joyous. I hardly know what to do with myself for very happiness.”

Father Faber’s novitiate was a busy one. Having spent a short time at Maryvale, the Oratorian house, he was, after all, allowed to go back to Saint Wilfrid’s. He preached in a number of the London chapels during Lent. In consequence of his various labors, he fell ill. While at Scarborough, where he was sent to recuperate, he wrote the first two of his hymns, “*Mother of Mercy!*” and “*Jesus! My Lord, my God, my All!*” Towards the end of July, he was dispensed from the rest of his novitiate and was made novice-master.

In October of 1848, the Oratorians, who now numbered over forty, seemed to be outgrowing their home at Maryvale. Accordingly, they decided to move to Saint Wilfrid’s, which was larger and more attractive. Here, they found all round them a Catholic atmosphere unusual at that time anywhere in England.

A controversy came to a head in the autumn of that year. The controversy had been going on for some time regarding a series of “Lives of the Saints” that Father Faber had been editing. These Lives were merely translations of authorized foreign works. No attempt had been made to adapt them in any way, Father Faber believing that the publication in their entirety of what were classical works of piety in Catholic countries would best supply the need of English-speaking Catholics for devotional biographies of the saints, particularly of the more modern ones.

“The project met with a mixed reception. Many welcomed the series, but it had been opposed from the first,” says Father Bowden, “by persons who considered the publication of such Lives injudicious, as being both unsuited to the condition of English Catholics, and likely to disgust and repel Protestants.”

When Father Faber entered the Oratory, the question arose as to whether the work should be continued as an Oratorian enterprise. Father Newman consulted the Bishop (Doctor Ullathorne) on the matter, and he advised that the Lives should be issued in a different form. As this was regarded as an expression of disapproval, the series was suspended.

“Letters were received by Father Faber from all quarters,” says his biographer, “lamenting the suspension, and expressing the hope that it was but temporary. Many instances thus came to light of the good that the Lives had done, one person, to take a single instance, declaring that they had saved him from apostasy.” Bishop Ullathorne publicly made it known that the Lives were not suppressed by the intervention of authority, as many had concluded, and expressed his own regret at their cessation. These considerations prompted the Oratorian Fathers to resume the series early in January, 1849.

The Oratory in London

As by their rule, Oratories can only be established in towns, Father Newman about this time moved a portion of the community to Birmingham, where he decided to make a permanent settlement. Doctor Wiseman urged him to transfer the Oratory to London. Father Newman, however, suggested instead that another house of the Congregation should be started in the metropolis. The proposal was met with cordial acceptance, and premises in King William Street, Strand, were acquired as a temporary home. The property consisted of two houses, with a large one-storied building at the back, the upper room of which was decided on as a chapel. The site is now occupied by the Charing Cross Hospital.

Father Faber was put in charge of the new enterprise, and the last and greatest stage of his career—his London apostolate—was reached when he and several members of the Saint Wilfrid’s community arrived at their new and almost unfurnished abode on April 28th, 1849.

By dint of hard work, the chapel was readied for opening on May 31st. Doctor Wiseman assisted pontifically and preached. The establishment of the Oratorians in London was particularly welcome to him as Saint Philip’s friends were his. He himself was a brother

of the Little Oratory and he had made a promise to Saint Philip that he would do his best to introduce the Oratory into England, a pledge that he had been able to fulfill by guiding Newman's vocation into the congregation.

The methods of the Oratorians aroused much comment, even from Catholics. The marks of the Penal Laws were still upon Catholics in England. By tradition retiring, many of the hereditary English Catholics disliked the prominence into which the Oratorians and their friends brought the whole Catholic body. Moreover, the new devotions the Oratorians introduced from abroad, their popular hymns, and their style of preaching presented Catholic piety at an angle that some were too insular to appreciate. While the soundness of the religion of these descendants of the martyrs was never in question, it was not always proof against a certain narrowness of outlook.

It must be born in mind that, in 1849 the Catholic Church in England was still a long way from the position of comparative importance and influence that it holds today. In the whole of London at that time there were only 42 churches and 84 priests. The churches themselves presented a very different appearance. We would consider them today very scantily equipped. The metropolis could boast of only one statue of Our Lady.

The coming of Father Faber to London struck a new note in the English Catholic world. Disregarding traditional caution, he set to work with untrammelled optimism on the lines he had learnt from Saint Philip. At once, his efforts were rewarded with success, and the increased fervor of the faithful and a fruitful crop of conversions effectively silenced criticisms.

Protestant London became seriously alarmed at the Popish invasion, anti-Oratorian hostility reaching its climax at the end of 1850, during the agitation arising from the reestablishment of the Hierarchy in England. "All over the walls," wrote Father Faber, "you see 'Down with the Oratorians,' 'Beware of the Oratorians,' 'Don't go to the Oratory,' 'Banishment to the Oratorians,' and in Leicester Square a triple placard of singular truthfulness, 'No Popery! Down with the Oratorians! No religion at all!'"

Unperturbed, the Oratorians continued their many good works, in which Father Faber took more than his share. In the autumn of 1849, he and two other Fathers assisted during an outbreak of cholera among some Irish hop pickers in Kent, at the instance of the Protestant rector of the parish, who was a year later received into the Church.

The great Confraternity of the Precious Blood was formally inaugurated on the first Sunday of July, 1850. During the same year Father Newman gave before a distinguished congregation in the Oratory Chapel his lectures on The Difficulties of Anglicans, which resulted in many conversions.

As Oratorian communities are autonomous and as the London Oratory had been from the beginning an obvious success, it was soon thought that the time had come to make of it a separate foundation. Accordingly, the London body was released from its obedience to Father Newman and on Saint Wilfrid's Day, 1850, Father Faber was elected Superior, an office that he continued to hold, by reelection every three years, until his death.

In the autumn of 1851, the state of his health having rendered a complete change and rest being advisable, Father Faber resolved to carry out a plan he had long cherished to visit the Holy Land. Unfortunately, he was too ill to proceed beyond Malta. While there, he was mistaken for his uncle, the Reverend G. S. Faber, a noted protagonist of Protestantism. "A certain Canon Psaila," he wrote, "has written an answer to my uncle's Difficulties of Romanism in 780 pages. A copy is coming to me to read! I am said to have written the Difficulties in old times and priests cry over me, and say, 'Che grazia!'"

On their return journey, Father Faber and his companions passed through Rome, where they were granted an audience by Pope Pius IX. "The Holy Father," says Father Bowden, "received them most graciously, and asked Father Faber what privileges he would like to have. 'Nothing for myself alone, Beatissimo Padre,' was his answer. 'But whatever Your Holiness pleases to give to my Congregation.' On his presenting a petition for a daily Plenary Indulgence for the Church of the Oratory, the Pope said, 'This must go to the Congregation of Rites.' 'Ah! Holy Father,' answered Father Faber, 'you can do it yourself if you will,' upon which the Pope laughed and signed the paper."

In September, 1852, Father Faber paid his first visit to Ireland. Everywhere he received an enthusiastic welcome. He preached twice at the Jesuit Church; Gardiner Street, Dublin, during a Triduum that was being celebrated in honor of the Beatification of Father Peter Claver of the Society of Jesus.

An incident that occurred during Advent of the same year exemplifies his particular regard for the Irish people. Father Faber and some of the other Fathers were giving a mission at their schools in the slums of Holborn. The majority of the Catholics of the neighborhood were Catholics only in name. "It was difficult," says Father Bowden, "to move souls that had been so long hardened by neglect. At length, Father Faber, at the end of an impassioned sermon that had been coldly listened to, exclaimed, 'How can I touch your hearts? I have prayed to Jesus. I have prayed to Mary. Whom shall I pray to next? I will pray to you, my dear Irish children, to have mercy on your own souls.'" These words, and the sight of Father Faber kneeling before them, had a wonderful effect. The whole congregation fell on their knees and for some minutes nothing was heard but their sobs and prayers."

The Move to Brompton

An important undertaking was begun in the spring of 1853 when work was started on a new and permanent home for the community at Brompton, which was at that time practically a country suburb of London. A house was erected and a temporary church, the Fathers agreeing with Father Newman that, "a house will build a church, but a church will never build a house." They moved to their new quarters in March, 1854, and the church was opened later in the same month. There, in spite of the scantiness of the Catholic population in the neighborhood, the exercises and devotions soon became well frequented, the success of the services being largely due to Father Faber's careful superintendence of very detail.

At the Oratory Father Faber lived a most retired life. On the rare occasions when he left its precincts, it was generally either to spend a few days at Saint Mary's, Sydenham, the country-house of the community, where he would continue his literary labors, or to pay a visit to one of the schools in the Fathers' charge. There, he was always certain of an enthusiastic welcome. Children, indeed, were always attracted to him. With him, as with Saint Philip, fondness for children was a marked characteristic.

As time went on, the scope of Father Faber's work increased. His correspondence became very large and his books stimulated numerous requests for spiritual assistance, which was always ungrudgingly given. From 1856, he acted as novice-master as well as Superior. In addition to the cares that these offices entailed, he labored under the burden of ever-present financial anxiety, which was responsible for many of the numerous illnesses from which he suffered for the last few years of his life. Even when almost crushed under a load of severe pain, he would patiently continue his work of writing, directing, and preaching.

Sometimes, sudden collapse would terminate his activities for a time. One such blow fell on the occasion of a visit to Ireland in the summer of 1855, when upon reaching Dublin he became seriously ill. He was moved to Bray, where his health began to improve, but it was some weeks before he could return home. His physician then told him that he had before him a long period of great suffering. "Well, it is something to know the worst," he wrote. "I can't get well except through excruciating torture. It may come soon, it may be delayed for months. . . . At present, I am a little excited and I may mope a little afterwards. But, as far as my will goes, I am quite ready for the suffering, and don't doubt it is an immense love that makes God think it worth His while to take so much pains with me."

Preacher and Writer

Father Faber's exceptional gifts as a preacher are best described in the words of his friend and contemporary, Cardinal Manning:

"He had a facility and flexibility of mind and voice, a vividness of apprehension and of imagination, a beauty of conception and of expression—a beauty that is to the eye and to the ear, with a brightness of confidence, as of a man who lived in the light and peace of God, and a longing desire to make others possess the happiness he enjoyed. . . . Father Faber's preaching was not a discourse elaborately worked out and delivered with a sensible or conscious effort but the overflow of a mind perpetually fed from its own inward sources and pouring with an exuberance of which we have known no example."

If Father Faber had concentrated the whole of his energies on the foundation of the London Oratory and his apostolate there, he would have left an enduring monument of his greatness. Yet within the narrow compass of eighteen years of Catholic life he found time, amid the distraction of urgent cares, to compose the hymns and spiritual works that, more than all else, have made his name familiar to the whole Church as a great servant of God.

His hymns are sung by English-speaking Christian congregations, both Catholic and protestant, throughout the world. Such hymns as "*Jesus! My Lord, my God, my All!*," "*Mother of Mercy!*," "*O purest of creatures,*" "*Oh turn to Jesus, Mother! Turn,*" "*Faith of our Fathers!*," and "*O Paradise! O Paradise!*" (to mention only half-a-dozen out of 150) have for most of us the same familiar ring as our best-known prayers. Their apt poetical expression of a warm personal devotion is sufficient to explain their popularity.

Father Faber's first work of importance as a Catholic, "*All for Jesus*," appeared in July, 1853. A rapid writer, he wrote it in about six weeks. Yet, it must be remembered that he often worked at it sixteen hours a day and that he made sedulous preparations for his works for a long time beforehand. He was an assiduous reader (and not of theological books alone—he is said to have asked for *Dombey* while on his death-bed) and an ardent collector of books bearing on the subjects of his studies; these were the nucleus of the noble library of the London Oratory.

"*All for Jesus*" or "*Easy Ways of Divine Love*" was an attempt, so its author explains in the preface, to assist people living in the world to sanctify themselves in their ordinary vocations by putting before them things that, while being attractive as devotions, tend to raise their fervor, quicken their love, and increase their happiness in practical religion and its duties. "The name of his first book," said Cardinal Manning, "is like a note in music. In all his writings, in all his teachings, there is the same strain throughout—'All for Jesus.'"

Its success was immediate. Four editions were issued in about nine months. It circulated far beyond the shores of Great Britain and versions appeared in French, German, Flemish, Italian, and Polish. Of all Father Faber's books, it has always made the greatest appeal.

The secret of the popularity of "*All for Jesus*" and his other works lies in the almost unique combination of qualities that they exhibit. Here, we find the results of his wide reading in dogmatic and ascetic theology woven into a harmonious pattern by means of an original and graceful literary style. What strikes the modern reader most is the freshness of Father Faber's writing; it does not "date." If here and there we meet what might be called an extravagance, we must remember Cardinal Newman's reply to a protestant critic of Father Faber, "He was a poet."

Between 1853 and 1860, Father Faber wrote and published eight substantial volumes on the spiritual life, a remarkable feat considering the number and variety of his ordinary occupations.

"*Growth in Holiness*" or "*Progress of the Spiritual Life*" (1854) is concerned with those souls who are engaged in "patient perseverance in the humbling practices of solid virtue."

The object of "*The Blessed Sacrament*" or "*Works and Ways of God*" (1855) was to "popularize certain portions of the science of theology, in the same way as handbooks and manuals have popularized astronomy, geology, and other physical sciences."

"The '*Creator and the Creature*' (1856)," Father Faber tells us, "stands to the author's other works in the relation of source and origin." Love is the motive of God in creation, as it should be the mainspring of the activities of His creatures. Here, indeed, we have the gist of Father Faber's message. He insists on the necessity of a "personal love of the Creator, a religion that is simply a service of love, a love that brings us within the suck of that gulf of the Divine Beauty that is our holiness here as it is our happiness hereafter."

Father Faber planned a series of works on the Passion, only one of which he was destined to complete—"The Foot of the Cross" or "*The Sorrows of Mary*." This was published before Lent in 1858. Early the following year appeared Father Faber's "*Spiritual Conferences*," a work said to be typical of the sermons he was accustomed to preach.

In "*The Precious Blood*" or "*The Price of our Salvation*" (1860) Father Faber expounds the dogma of our redemption through the Blood of Jesus, dwells on its implications, and proceeds to the devotion to the Precious Blood, which he regarded as a development of devotion to the Sacred Heart. Accomplishing a work dealing with one of his favorite devotions must have been a source of special satisfaction to Father Faber, as no doubt it was to the members of the Confraternity of the Precious Blood, for whom it was written and to whom it was dedicated.

In the Advent of 1860 appeared "*Bethlehem.*" This was Father Faber's last great work, as was fitting for a book he said that he wrote to please himself, the rest having been written to please others.

Last Days

Up to the end of 1861, Father Faber had been so successful in his struggle with ill-health that he had been able to carry on his normal occupations with fair regularity. From this time onwards, however, encroaching disease compelled him practically to renounce both the pen and the pulpit.

On Passion Sunday, 1863, he preached his last sermon of all, on Our Blessed Lord Bowing His Head upon the Cross. On April 26th, the Feast of the Patronage of Saint Joseph and the anniversary of the foundation of the Oratory in London, he said Mass for the last time.

Cardinal Wiseman paid him a visit of farewell on July 14th and later in the day sent him a letter in the course of which he said, "I cannot but think how consoled and fortified you must feel, by your having, from the moment of your joining the Church, so entirely devoted your time and abilities to the particular and almost exclusive work of promoting and extending in it the spirit of holiness and true piety. And your exertions have been eminently blest not only in England but in every country, as the Holy Father himself declared to me."

In spite of excessive suffering, Father Faber maintained his keen interest in all the affairs of his religious family. The doctors gave no hope of a cure. Early in September he became worse. On the evening of the 25th it became evident to the sorrowing Fathers that their beloved Superior was dying. Informed of his state, he fervently repeated his favorite ejaculation, "God be praised!" Shortly after seven the next morning, the end came peacefully. Father Bowden tells us that as he knelt before the Father's deathbed, it seemed the realization of the picture that he himself had drawn when he said in "*All for Jesus,*"

"Only serve Jesus out of love, and while your eyes are yet unclosed, before the whiteness of death is yet settled upon your face, or those around you are sure that that last gentle breathing was indeed your last, what an unspeakable surprise will you have had at the judgment-seat of your dearest Love, while the songs of heaven are breaking on your ears, and the glory of God is dawning on your eyes, to fade away no more forever!" *

* *All for Jesus, ch. ii.*

“For this was the end of a life,” adds Father Bowden, “which from the first to last had been religious. In early childhood, the things of God had been his joy. As he grew up, he sought painfully and anxiously the truth as it is in Christ and then had given up all to find it. Every letter tells that it was his engrossing thought and every line of poetry bears the mark of heavenly aspiration. The golden words wherein his work will be still continued, and the sweet music of his hymns of praise, speak in language that cannot be mistaken the singleness of purpose with which he sought the interests of Jesus and the chivalrous ardor with which he promoted the Church’s cause. To this he devoted talents, energy, and health, only caring to labor where the Will of God had placed him, and thus, when he came to die, his history might have been written in the simple words—he served Jesus out of love.”

A crowded church for solemn vespers of the dead on September 29th and for the high Mass of requiem the next day bore witness to the widespread and intense sorrow felt at the much-loved Father’s early death. Numbers followed the funeral procession on foot the many miles to Saint Mary’s, Sydenham, where he was laid to rest in the little cemetery at the foot of the cross of its consecration.

Epilogue

SINCE this pamphlet was first published, Father Faber, by Ronald Chapman (London, Burns & Oates, 1961), has appeared. The life by Father John Bowden has long been out of print and, in any case, it was written so soon after Father Faber’s death that much had to be left unsaid so no offense might be given to those still living. It is all past history now and Ronald Chapman was given access to the private letters and papers in the archives of the London and Birmingham Oratories. While the rest of Father Faber’s works are out of print in many countries, Messrs. Burns & Oates have recently brought out new editions of “*Growth in Holiness*” and “*The Creator and the Creature*,” both with introductions by Ronald Chapman.

In 1951, the London County Council, using the compulsory powers it possesses, acquired the Congregation’s country house, Saint Mary’s, Sydenham Hill, referred to in the pamphlet, for a housing estate. This necessitated removal of the bodies of the Fathers and Brothers of the Congregation who had all, prior to that date, been buried in the private cemetery on the grounds of Saint Mary’s.

The rest of the bodies were transferred to a plot acquired by the community in the Gunnersbury cemetery, but, with the permission of the ecclesiastical and civil authorities,

Father Faber's body was reinterred in the Oratory church, before the altar of Saint Wilfrid, his patron. His resting place is marked by a grey marble slab in the floor of Saint Wilfrid's chapel with the inscription:

HOC LAPIDE TEGUNTUR OSSA PRAEPOSITI PRIMI
CONGREGATIONIS HUIUS ORATORII LONDINIENSIS FREDERICI
GULIELMI FABER OBIT VI KAL OCTOBR A S MDCCCLXIII AETis
SUAE XLIX POST HABITUM S PHILIPPI INDUTUM XV R I P

"This stone covers the remains of the first Provost of this London
Congregation of the Oratory, Frederick William Faber. He died on the
26th September, 1863, the forty-ninth year of his age and the fifteenth
after putting on the habit of Saint Philip. R.I.P."

But of Father Faber, as of Sir Christopher Wren, one might well have written up in the
London Oratory church, "Si monumentum requiris, circumspice." "If you seek his
monument, look around." V.J.M

The Guardian Angel

Dear Angel ever at my side,
How loving must thou be,
To leave thy home in heaven to guard
A guilty wretch like me.

Thy beautiful and shining face
I see not, though so near;
The sweetness of thy soft low voice
I am too deaf to hear.

I cannot feel thee touch my hand
With pressure light and mild,
To check me, as my mother did
When I was but a child.

But I have felt thee in my thoughts
Fighting with sin for me;
And when my heart loves God, I know
The sweetness is from thee.

And when dear Spirit, I kneel down
Morning and night to prayer,
Something there is within my heart
Which tells me thou art there.

Yes, when I pray thou prayest too,
Thy prayer is all for me;
But when I sleep, thou sleepest not
But watchest patiently.

But most of all I feel thee near,
When, from the good priest's feet,
I go absolved, in fearless love,
Fresh toils and cares to meet.

And thou in life's last hour wilt bring,
A fresh supply of grace,
And afterwards wilt let me kiss
Thy beautiful bright face.

Ah me, how lovely they must be
Whom God has glorified;
Yet one of them, O sweetest thought!
Is ever at my side.

Then, for thy sake dear Angel, now
More humble will I be:
But I am weak, and when I fall,
Oh weary not of me:

O weary not, but love me still,
For Mary's sake, thy Queen;
She never tired of me, though I
Her worst of sons have been.

She will reward thee with a smile;
Thou know'st what it is worth!
For Mary's smiles each day convert
The hardest hearts on earth.

Then love me, love me, Angel dear!
And I will love thee more;
And help me when my soul is cast
Upon the eternal shore.

~ Father Frederick William Faber (1814-1863) ~



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